

Erupting Out of the “Zone of Non-Being”: The Cunning of Solidarity

Begüm Adalet

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XXX, No 1 (2022) pp 79-81.

Vol XXX, No 1 (2022)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2022.1010
www.jffp.org



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

Erupting Out of the “Zone of Non-Being”

The Cunning of Solidarity

Begüm Adalet

Cornell University

Anticolonial Eruptions: Racial Hubris and the Cunning of Resistance takes its readers on a whirlwind narrative of slavery, colonialism, and resistance to them, from the Haitian Revolution to the raid on Harper’s Ferry, from the Zapatista uprising to the struggle against the Dakota access pipeline in Standing Rock. Geo Maher writes with urgency as explosive as the volcanic eruptions of the anti-racist and anticolonial struggles he covers in the book. His interlocutors are as varied as Herman Melville, W. E. B. Du Bois, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Jordan Peele. As with Maher’s previous work, the book unfolds with unrelenting dialectical fervor, pitting the hubris of the powerful against the cunning of the oppressed, and making the case, at each turn, for the possibility of solidarity between the enslaved and the colonized.

The basis for this solidarity, Maher writes, can be found in a type of shared decolonial cunning, that is, “a specific kind of knowledge developed of and through their subjection.”¹ This cunning leverages the experience of being rendered invisible and it consists of developing a second sight against the blind spots of colonialism. While the colonizer do not pay attention to their existence, the enslaved and the colonized watch, listen, plot, and go undetected. They become familiar with the terrain, map out cartographies of liberation, and forge infrastructures of communication. Domestic workers take advantage of their intimate entanglement with the daily activity of colonial households, all the while waiting to burst onto the scene (48-9).

During a time when metaphor is under scrutiny vis-à-vis its relationship to slavery, settler colonialism, and decolonization, Maher embraces an evocative and powerful set of natural, subterranean, and ghostly metaphors. Those who cultivate decolonial cunning are likened to volcanoes, avalanches, gravediggers, tunneling moles, spies, spooks, and specters. What are the politics and potency of the metaphors used in the book? Does metaphor mystify and obfuscate occupation and expropriation, extending innocence to the settler, as Tuck and Yang argue, for instance?² Or does it

reveal the very structuring logics and political ontology of slavery, as Garba and Sorrentino will have it?³

Maher seems to take the second route, writing of “the ontological veil of marginality” (82) and summoning those who are “wrapped in colonial non-being like an invisibility cloak” (18). In doing so, he centers Frantz Fanon’s concept of the “zone of non-being.” On the one hand, the book is a rejoinder to certain Afropessimist interpretations of this phrase, which Maher points out, hinge on an omitted comma in a new translation of *Black Skin, White Masks*, and arrive at a theory of negation. Fanon, in fact, describes the zone of being as “an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential [comma] from which a genuine new departure can emerge.” It is the re-insertion of this comma that introduces the possibility of “a new departure,” Maher writes, the possibility of “something truly and radically new” that might emerge from the zone of non-being, no matter how sterile and arid a region that may be (20).

I find this a welcome and generative corrective, but I also wonder about the consequences of the book’s centering of the concept of non-being and attendant ontological terminology. Maher writes, for instance, that “colonialism is a gargantuan machine that produces sugar, cotton, and capital, of course, but it also produces nonbeing” (6) and that “colonialism and slavery are not *merely* systems of domination but systems of nonbeing” (12). Elsewhere, he argues that “when colonialism swept across the globe, it imposed more than *mere* domination, more than political or economic control,” adding that the radical “dehumanization” of chattel slavery and colonization “cut across even the ontological level, the level of human Being” (21). I wonder about the work that “mere” and “merely” do in these passages, whether there is a flattening that comes with the universal metaphor of non-being and the framework of dehumanization, and whether there is an erasure of the particular labor of those toiling in kitchens, bedrooms, plantations, mines, and many other sites of exploitation, dispossession, and oppression, which, after all, depend on the human activities, reproduction, and “being” of those same workers. Does the notion of “non-being” do the work Maher wants it to be doing in the book? And in what sense are similar concepts that appear throughout the book, such as the “abyss,” the “underlife,” and “the undercommons” akin to “a mutiny from the gloating underground of the slave ship’s hold” (71)? Does the language of “non-being” capture the types of human activity and labor that are submerged and yet always potentially eruptive?

At the same time, I wonder if there are some limits to not only the metaphors, but also some of the comparisons that emerge towards the end of the book. On page 84, Maher draws a contrast between “even the most militant of labor strikes are in some sense expected,” and those instances “when the colonized subject springs forth from the zone of nonbeing,” which is a “different and wilder cat altogether.” Do such contrasts reproduce the

blinkered vision of the oppressor? Alternatively, do metaphors and comparisons create the possibility of some solidarities, while foreclosing others?

I would like to end by saying that I am really grateful for *Anticolonial Eruptions* and what I understand to be its beautiful, infectious, and necessary optimism. This is an optimism that identifies the vulnerability in contemporary imperial hubris, whether that hubris is on display in drone technology or border walls (92-3). This is an optimism that is also shared by workers who are identifying and acting on the weaknesses and vulnerabilities in Amazon warehouses, Starbucks coffeeshops, universities, and many other places. I look forward to thinking with, teaching, and writing about this book. Thank you.

¹ Geo Maher, *Anticolonial Eruptions: Racial Hubris and the Cunning of Resistance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 11. Hereafter referred to parenthetically by page number.

² Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1(1), 2012: 1-40.

³ Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino, “Slavery is a Metaphor: A Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s ‘Decolonization is Not a Metaphor’” *Antipode* 52(3), 2020: 764-782.